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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Queensborough Community College to determine if instruction in taking tests would significantly improve the responses of non-proficient readers to multiple-choice, open-ended, and cloze-type questions. Students enrolled in 18 reading and study skills improvement classes (N=394) were divided into three main groups: the group receiving test-taking instruction; the test-taking practice group, which was permitted to practice taking tests but received no instruction; and the control group, which was given no instruction and no opportunity to practice. Standardized reading comprehension tests were administered at the beginning and at the end of the study. Results indicated that: (1) instruction in taking multiple-choice and open-ended tests did not significantly improve performance on tests employing these formats; (2) instruction in cloze-type test-taking resulted in significant improvement in the ability of students to correctly complete cloze responses on passages of a standardized reading comprehension test; and (3) practice on a particular test format without formal instruction was not sufficient in itself to produce significant gains in test performance. (Author/JP)

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THE EFFECTS OF PROVIDING TEST-TAKING INSTRUCTION
FOR VARIOUS TYPES OF EXAMINATIONS TO A SELECTED
SAMPLE OF JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of test-taking instruction when non-proficient junior college readers were provided instruction in how to respond to questions of the following types: multiple-choice, open-ended, and cloze.

The subjects of the study were 349 students enrolled in eighteen reading and study skills improvement classes at Queensborough Community College in Bayside, New York.

The major conclusions were as follows:

(1) Test-taking instruction for standardized multiple-choice tests and for open-ended tests did not appear to be an effective technique for improving performance on a standardized reading comprehension test.

(2) Test-taking instruction for cloze tests appeared to be a fruitful technique for improving the performance of students in the completing of cloze responses on passages of a standardized reading comprehension test.

(3) Test-taking practice without formal instruction did not appear to be a fruitful technique for improving the performance of students on a multiple-choice, open-ended, or cloze format of standardized reading comprehension tests. Any gains made as a result of practice effect were not statistically significant. It was concluded that practice on a particular test format unaccompanied by formal instruction was not sufficient in itself to effectuate significant student gains in test performance.

It should be emphasized that the results of this study

may be generalized only to the non-proficient junior college reader who is being assessed in standardized tests of skills such as reading rather than content.

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Purposes of the Study

The major purposes of this study were (1) to determine the effectiveness of test-taking instruction in which non-proficient junior college readers are provided instruction in how to respond to questions of the following types--multiple-choice, open-ended, and cloze; and, (2) to determine if a significant difference exists between test results achieved by the group given test-taking instruction (Instructional Group) when compared with a group which is given no instruction and not afforded the opportunity to practice (Control Group) and with a group which is permitted to practice on various test selections but is given no test-taking instruction (Practice Group).

Subjects

A total of 349 students at Queensborough Community College were used as the subjects in the study. These students were assigned to reading and study skills improvement classes at the college on the basis of having scores between the 12th and 16th percentile on Total Reading (Vocabulary and Comprehension) on the Cooperative English Examination, Form 1A. These classes are categorized as remedial, for which no academic credit is offered.

The college is located in Bayside, an outlying section of the borough of Queens in New York City, about three miles from suburban Nassau County. Most students at the college are from middle and lower-middle class families.

Materials

The Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Forms A, B, C, and D were used. This is a standardized reading test designed for grades nine through sixteen. The test contains a Vocabulary and Comprehension section. Reading rate can also be measured by requesting examinees to mark the point they have reached in the Comprehension section of the test one minute after they had begun that section. For the purposes of this study, only the Comprehension section of the test was administered, without measurement of reading rate. The Comprehension section consisted of eight reading selections, with each selection followed by several multiple-choice questions pertaining to that selection. As will be described immediately below, the form of the test questions was changed for some subjects.

Procedures

An open-ended and a cloze format for each test form was prepared before the administration of any of the examinations. In the open-ended format, the multiple-choice question was posed, but no written choices were provided so that the examinee had to answer using his or her own words when writing the response. These subjects were instructed that they could answer using one or more words, but their response should not exceed one sentence. This was done to encourage brief answers which would perhaps more closely match the brief multiple-choice answers presented in the examination booklet. The responses to the open-ended

questions were graded correct or incorrect on the basis of their relevance to the reading selection to which the particular question pertained. The responses were at first independently graded correct or incorrect by this investigator and also by another professional reading instructor, who was not connected with any other aspect of this study. In the great majority of cases, (86 %), there was agreement between these two judges on the correctness or incorrectness of the responses. In those instances where there was disagreement, the decision of a third judge, also a professional reading instructor, was accepted as the final decision.

The cloze format for each form of the test was prepared as follows: the first and last sentence of each reading selection on the test was left intact; beginning with the second sentence of each selection, every fifth word was deleted with a horizontal line inserted for each deleted word. The line in each case was of uniform length (one-half inch) so that the examinee would be unable to obtain any clue about the missing word from the length of the line. In order to be graded correct, the examinee's response had to correspond exactly to the word which had been deleted.

Four full-time reading and study skills instructors at Queensborough Community College assisted the investigator in the implementation of this study. A total of eighteen classes of students were involved as the subjects. The study was conducted during late February and early March of 1979, over a two-week period, with each class meeting two times a week, as regularly scheduled, during that time. Twenty minutes of each class session for five consecutive sessions were devoted to the imple-

mentation of the study.

The participating classes were divided into the following categories for the purpose of this study:

I. Six classes were designated as test-taking Instructional groups. In the first class session, the subjects were pre-tested with the Comprehension section of Form B of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. During each of the next three class sessions, the subjects were given planned instruction on how to take tests effectively. Various reference works were used in helping to plan the instruction. The subjects were post-tested with Form A of the Comprehension section of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test during the fifth and final session.

- A. Two of the six classes received test-taking instruction for multiple-choice tests. The multiple-choice format of the test was used for pre-and post-testing and the instruction was specifically geared for the taking of standardized multiple-choice tests.
- B. Two of the classes received test-taking instruction for open-ended tests. The open-ended format of the test was used for pre-and post-testing and the instruction was specifically geared for taking open-ended tests.
- C. Two of the classes received test-taking instruction for cloze tests. The cloze format of the test was used for pre-and post-testing and the instruction was specifically geared for taking cloze tests.

II. Six classes were designated as test-taking practice groups. In the first class session the subjects were pre-tested with the Comprehension section of Form B of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. During the next three sessions, they were permitted to practice taking the Comprehension sections of Forms B, C, and D respectively; but no formal instruction was provided during those sessions. The subjects were post-tested with the Comprehension section of Form A during the fifth and final session.

- A. Two of these classes were pre-and post-tested and permitted to practice on the multiple-choice formats of the test.
- B. Two of these classes were pre-and post-tested and permitted to practice on the open-ended format of the test.
- C. Two of these classes were pre-and post-tested and permitted to practice on the cloze format of the test.

III. Six classes were designated as control groups. In the first class session, the subjects were pre-tested with the Comprehension section of Form B of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. During the next three sessions, the classes were presented with instruction in note-taking skills, an area that had no direct relationship with test-taking skills involved in taking standardized tests. The subjects were post-tested with the Comprehension section of Form A of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test during the fifth and final session.

- A. Two of these classes were pre-and post-tested with the multiple-choice format of the test.

B. Two of these classes were pre-and post-tested with the open-ended format of the test.

C. Two of these classes were pre-and post-tested with the cloze format of the test.

Only the results of those subjects who were present in class for all five sessions during which the study was conducted were tabulated.

The overall research design and the final number of subjects used from each group may be diagrammed as follows:

Table 1

The Overall Research Design

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables		
	Multiple-choice test format	Open-ended test format	Cloze test format
Test-Taking Instructional Group	N = 40	N = 38	N = 39
Test-Taking Practice Group	N = 36	N = 39	N = 42
Control Group	N = 35	N = 40	N = 40
Grand Total	N = 349		

One way analyses of covariance, with the pre-test as the covariate, were performed to determine whether statistically significant differences existed in each test category (multiple-choice, open-ended, and cloze) when post-test results of the Instructional groups were compared with those of the Practice groups and with the Control groups. When statistically significant differences were found to exist at the .05 level,

a series of Scheffé tests were employed to pinpoint the precise nature and extent of these differences.

Results

The main findings were as follows:

1. No significant differences were found to exist among the multiple-choice post-test scores or among the open-ended post-test scores of any of the groups (Instructional, Practice, or Control).

2. The cloze Instructional group achieved significantly higher post-test scores at the .05 level than did the cloze Practice group and the cloze Control group. There was no statistically significant difference between the mean post-test scores of the cloze Practice and cloze Control groups.

Table 2

Scheffé Test Results With Cloze Post-tests as the Dependent Variable, With Mean Post-test Scores Listed in Descending Order

Group	N	$\bar{X}$
Instructional	39	16.08
Control	40	8.53
Practice	42	7.55
Critical difference = 4.93		

3. No statistically significant differences were found among the post-test performance of any of the Practice groups when compared with the corresponding Control groups.

Conclusions

It should be noted that the results are limited and are possibly applicable only to students having the same characteristics of those in this study, and to instruction and reading materials having the same characteristics as those used in the study. The following conclusions are made, but within the limitations just stated:

1. Test-taking instruction for standardized multiple-choice tests and for open-ended tests did not appear to be an effective technique for improving performance on a standardized reading comprehension test.

2. Test-taking instruction for cloze tests appeared to be a fruitful technique for improving the performance of students, in the completing of cloze responses on passages of a standardized reading comprehension test.

3. Test-taking practice without formal instruction did not appear to be a fruitful technique for improving the performance of students on a multiple-choice, open-ended, or cloze format of standardized reading comprehension tests. Any gains made as a result of practice effect were not statistically significant. It was concluded that practice on a particular test format unaccompanied by formal instruction was not sufficient in itself to produce significant student gains in test performance.

Some suggestions for future research in these areas included: (1) studies similar to the present one which utilize subjects of a different age and grade level; (2) further study in the effectiveness of test-taking instruction on standardized test results compared with results achieved on teacher-constructed

examinations; (3) further studies which examine the relationship between test-wiseness and factors such as age, sex, and verbal ability; and, (4) studies similar to the present one to determine any possible long-range effectiveness of test-taking instruction and/or practice.

It is emphasized that the results of this study may be generalized only to the non-proficient junior college reader who is being assessed in standardized tests of skills rather than content.

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